



Changes by usa123

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Summary: Steve is keeping a secret. Dustin and Max take it upon themselves to figure out what it is. No slash, no ships, no romance, just Steve figuring out what he wants to do with the rest of his life.

Changes

A/N: There's a brief reference to *A Chance To Heal* in the latter part of this fic. It nothing major, just my take on Steve's family dynamic and how he (or rather, Jane) explained his injuries to his mom after the closing of The Gate.

It hadn't escaped Max's notice that Steve had been acting strange for a couple of days now. Not 'being possessed by a Shadow Monster' strange but still, odd for him. He was around the usual amount but was distracted, his mind obviously elsewhere.

She brought it up to Lucas who shrugged it off. "It's probably high school stuff," he'd said before jumping her last checker piece.

And maybe Lucas was right, but Max had relied so much on her ability to read people since her step-dad came into the picture that she couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to it.

So she'd watched Steve for a couple days, hoping whatever it was would go away on its own. When Friday came and went without any change, however, Max decided to ask him about it. (Realistically, she knew that there probably wasn't much she, as a fourteen-year-old, could do about whatever was bothering him, but maybe he just needed someone to listen. After all Steve'd done for them in the last couple months, it was the least she could do to return the favor.)

That evening, Steve had volunteered to drive the party to and from the arcade. Since Max lived the furthest away, he dropped everyone else off first then, as usual, parked down the street from the Hargrove house.

It was now or never.

Max pushed down the lock on the door, turned around to face Steve, and crossed her arms. "What's going on?" she demanded.

"You know that's the passenger's side, right? I can still get out." To prove his point, Steve popped open his door...for about a second. It

was still winter in Indiana after all.

"It's symbolic," Max replied, undeterred, pulling her arms tighter to her chest to ward off the sudden influx of cold air. "Now spill. What's going on?"

She wasn't sure Steve was going to answer, given that he was four years older than her but, to her surprise, he rubbed at the back of his neck and said, "I have an interview for the police academy."

Max stared him in confusion. "Steve, that's great, isn't it? You'll be a great cop."

"Here in Hawkins. Hopefully."

She slugged Steve in the arm, being sure to channel all the pent-up concern that she'd been carrying around over the past few days. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I'm not in yet," Steve scowled as he rubbed at his shoulder. "Still have to pass an interview, physical, polygraph, background check, and, oh!, a psych exam."

"Well you're screwed," Max deadpanned while leaning back into the passenger's seat. She was expecting Steve to fire off a snappy response or begin mock-complaining about how ungrateful she was, but there was only silence.

"Oh my god, you're really worried about that, aren't you?" she asked, flipping around so she was staring directly at Steve again. "You're gonna pass."

"It's not so much the psych exam," Steve began, his fingers digging harder into his shoulder. "It's...the rest of it."

"The rest of what?"

"For starters, *if* I get accepted, training is a ten-month program."

Max didn't understand the significance of that statement. "So?" she prompted, hoping that wasn't the end of Steve's talkative streak.

"In Plainfield."

Ah, that was it. Plainfield was over an hour away.

"We'll be fine, Steve," she said, knocking her elbow lightly against his. "You don't have to worry about us."

The senior nodded but still looked uncertain, meaning something else was still bothering...oh.

"What did your parents say?" she asked gently. Steve rarely talked about his parents and, from what he did share, she'd gleaned that they weren't violent like her dad, but more absent, frequently gone on long business trips, leaving Steve alone for weeks at a time. His mom at least seemed to feel bad about it but Max got the feeling his dad couldn't care less.

Steve just winced, giving Max her answer.

"You're going to have to tell them eventually."

"I know," Steve snapped, his face contorting into a deep scowl. "But I want to be sure. Once I tell them, it's not something I can take back."

For all Steve's time around the party, he was rarely ever physical. The most affectionate he got towards them was a hair ruffle, mostly with Dustin. But tonight, he looked so unsure that Max couldn't stand it. She leaned over and wrapped her right arm around his shoulders in an approximation of a hug. Steve just reached up and awkwardly patted her forearm, but he didn't try to push her away.

After another minute, Max pulled back. "You're gonna be a great cop, Steve Harrington," she said earnestly, before popping open the car door, hopping on her skateboard, and zooming away.

Though she hadn't explicitly been sworn to secrecy, Max still didn't say anything to the rest of the party about Steve and his decision. As the days passed, the senior had lightened up a bit, sliding back into a facsimile of his normal self; if anyone else in the party noticed the brief lapse, they hadn't mentioned it.

Six weeks later, though, Dustin discovered the acceptance letter in Steve's glove box while searching for napkins for the burgers he and Steve were eating.

"What's this?" he asked, nudging it out of the way with the knuckle of his middle finger, the only part of his hand not dripping in grease.

"Nothing," Steve said quickly.

Too quickly.

Dustin had just leaned forward to read the letter when Steve bumped him with his shoulder, knocking him off balance.

"It's nothing," the high-schooler repeated, closing the glove box with his elbow since his hands were still occupied with keeping his burger together.

But it was too late. Dustin had read enough of the letter to understand what it was about. "I didn't know you wanted to be a cop!" he shouted, leaning into Steve as an alternative to a high-five.

"I don't, okay?" With that, Steve downed the last of his burger, wiped his hands on the bag, then started the car. "It's getting late."

"Wait, Steve," Dustin began but the high-schooler was already pulling out of the lot. Dustin then had to focus solely on his burger, to keep it from sliding out of his hands during Steve's hairpin turns.

It was only once they were back in front of Dustin's house that the boy spoke up again. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I don't have to tell you twerps everything," Steve retorted, throwing the car into park and pulling up the door lock.

Dustin just nodded, not trusting himself to speak around the thick lump that had suddenly appeared in his throat, and pulled at the door handle. He'd known his friendship with Steve was too good to be true. At some point, Steve was going to—

There was a hand on his jacket, yanking him back into the car.

"Sit there and shut up," Steve scowled then proceeded to bang his head lightly against the steering wheel.

"You don't have to tell me," Dustin said after a moment before Steve could give himself brain damage.

The senior chuckled humorously but slowed to a stop, his head now resting against the steering wheel. "I'm just not sure it's right for me," he finally said. "I could go to college somewhere else, get a job with my dad, sit behind a desk all day. But it's safe work, you know? Dependable."

"But boring," Dustin chimed in, after Steve paused pointedly.

It must have been the right thing to say since Steve tilted his head in concession. "But normally policing a town like Hawkins isn't all that exciting—"

"Hawkins?" Dustin interrupted, eyes widening with excitement.

Steve rolled his head sideways along the wheel so he could look at Dustin. "Yeah, where else would I go?"

Dustin shrugged, trying (and failing) to play off the idea that he'd known that the whole time and wasn't at all thrilled to have Steve end up back here.

Before he could respond though, the high-schooler exhaled loudly then slouched even further against the steering wheel. "Why do people think you're suddenly old enough to decide what you want to do with the rest of your life the minute you turn eighteen?"

As much as Dustin wanted Steve to stay and work for Hopper for pseudo-selfish reasons, deep down he really just wanted Steve to be happy, in whatever form that took. "I don't know," he said slowly. "But you should do whatever is going to make you happy. Whatever feels right." Then he nodded proudly, since his very calm, very adult response had been generic enough to qualify as help but not be too polarizing.

Steve smiled wanly, then reached over and squeezed Dustin's shoulder. "Sorry I snapped at you."

Dustin waved his hand dismissively. "I know you didn't mean it."

"Still doesn't mean I should have said it."

"You can make it up to me by—"

Steve straightened up with a start, cutting off the rest of Dustin's sentence. "Oh look!" He pointed at the clock on the dash. "It's time for you to go."

Dustin sighed, knowing the high-schooler was right, and started gathering his stuff.

He had just opened the door before Steve spoke up again: "*Godzilla* is back in theaters for the weekend. If you wanted to go, I might know someone who was interested."

"How about *Friday the 13th*?" Dustin countered hopefully.

"Keep it up and it'll be the *Care Bears*."

Grinning wide enough to show off his teeth, Dustin spun around and saluted Steve. "*Godzilla* it is."

"Be outside by—" Steve began but the rest of his sentence was lost as Dustin took off in mad dash for his house.

Two weeks later, Steve had to make a tough decision. With Nancy's help, he'd scraped together a high enough GPA to get him accepted to a few state schools. His parents had been ecstatic and had immediately begun looking into majors which would help Steve in the family business.

Up in his room, Steve pushed his trig homework aside, slid the acceptance letter from the academy out of the secret pouch of his backpack and read it once again. This time, it was hard to deny that it just...*felt*...right.

So, he summoned his courage, went downstairs and told his parents. Not surprisingly, it didn't go well. His dad didn't speak at all and just left the room; his mom at least stayed back, all the while looking like

she'd just sucked on a lemon. She wasn't completely closed off though, as Steve had seen her get sometimes with his dad, so he was hoping that meant she was at least *open* to the idea.

"Why, Steve?" she asked in a tone that almost made Steve change his mind.

He stood firm though, drawing on his inner demo-dog fighting strength, and answered, "Because I'm *good* at this mom. All that mentoring with Dustin and his friends, it feels right, looking out for them, *protecting* them when I have to." All his mom knew about the events of last Halloween was the sanitized version Jane had told her about him keeping the party from getting mugged and getting himself beat up in the process. It wasn't necessarily the most flattering but had kept her from asking too many questions about the kids now being a part of his life.

"And I could be wrong," Steve continued after a beat. "I could be an absolutely terrible police officer, but I have to try."

His mom smiled at him sadly, then pulled him into a hug. "Okay sweetie," she said, before she swiped at her face then left the room as well.

Graduation day passed with a party of course: Caroline Harrington was *not* going to let one of the biggest days of her son's life go unnoticed. His dad had been even less open since Steve dropped the bomb about the police academy but he'd managed to show up to graduation with what would pass for a smile, something Steve suspected his mom had had a huge part in.

And then, before he knew it, it was moving day. Since Hawkins PD was sponsoring him at the academy, Hopper had arranged for Steve to stay with one of his old colleagues until Steve could afford a place on his own. That combined with the money his parents had given him for this effort (not as much as he would have gotten if he'd gone to an actual college but it was more than he had been expecting his dad to part with), meant he was fairly stable financially. He'd still need to get a job to keep afloat but he wouldn't be living in worry about where his next meal was coming from.

The Byers along with Hopper and Jane had stopped by the night before since Will had an appointment the next morning and Jane had a standing tutoring session with Flo's niece to get her ready for high school. Mrs. Byers had given Steve a brickish lump of something he was supposed to eat on the road before pulling him into a ribcracking hug (over his mom's shoulder, Will made wide repeated motions for Steve to just throw it out), Hopper had just shaken Steve's hand firmly and wished him luck, and both Will and Jane informed him that the rest of the party would be coming by tomorrow morning with a present from all six of them.

Sure enough, by the time Steve was walking out of the house with his last box, Dustin, Lucas, Mike and Max were leaning on his car, a messily wrapped package held between them. Nancy and Jonathan stood a few feet behind them, Jonathan anxiously twirling the key ring around his finger.

Steve immediately put down the box he was carrying and tore paper to find a framed 8x10 of all six of the party, smiling widely. Steve had only looked at it for a second to know that it had been taken and developed by Jonathan and that the frame had been chosen by Nancy (mostly because none of the other kids could color-match their way out of a barn).

"Thanks guys," he mumbled, while something began burning in the back of his eyes. The kids then shuffled over to wish him well, with various gestures of affection and lots of snuffling.

"Don't forget about us, 'k?" Dustin said as Steve slid the frame back into the padded envelope and rested it on the dashboard, where it wouldn't get broken.

"I could never forget about you." Then Steve reached out and pulled Dustin into a hug. Before he could let go though, some latched onto his right side, pulling him in tighter. Then someone onto his left and before he knew it, he was wrapped in a group hug.

He heard the click of a camera and looked up to see Jonathan and Nancy grinning. "We'll develop it and send it," Jonathan said, holding the camera vertical and snapping again.

"You have your bat right?" one of the kids asked, drawing Steve's attention back to the barnacles around him.

"In the trunk."

A chorus of laughs rang out and suddenly, Steve found himself regretting the decision to move away. *It's only for ten months*, he reminded himself before that train of thought ran too deep, *and he could always come home on weekends*.

Which reminded him of another point. "Don't be afraid to call me if something happens," Steve said. "I can be back in forty-three minutes if I push it."

"We won't," Max said, finally pulling out of the hug and tugging Lucas with her. "C'mon guys. We don't want to make him late."

The rest of the party reluctantly released Steve.

"Let us know when you get there!" Dustin called, making a phone out of his hand and holding it to his ear as he and the rest of the kids walked over to Joyce's Galaxy, allowing Jonathan and Nancy to step forward.

Nancy didn't hesitate and immediately pulled Steve into a hug of her own. "You're going to do great," she whispered, tightening the hug for a brief second before pulling back.

Not trusting himself to speak, Steve just smiled and nodded.

Then Jonathan held out his hand. "Let us know if you need something. Like you said, Plainfield isn't that far away."

Again Steve nodded as he shook Jonathan's hand. "Thanks," he finally managed to say. "Both of you."

"And good luck!" he added after a beat, since Jonathan was going off to NYU at the end of the summer and Nancy would do nothing but excel in her senior year.

They both smiled warmly, then began ushering the kids into the car, citing they'd let him finish packing in peace. The kids immediately

rolled down the rear windows and waved until they'd turned the corner at the end of the block.

After Steve finished loading in the last box, he walked back into the house to find his mother in the living room, pretending to read a book. As soon as he entered though, she dropped it onto the end table and rose to her feet.

"Do you have everything?"

"Yes, mom."

His mom held out her hands and Steve let himself be pulled into his mother's hug. "Let us know if Chief Hopper's friend isn't feeding you properly," she said into his shoulder. "We can drive over with some food."

"Thanks mom." Fighting back the tears that were welling, Steve tightened the hug then stepped back. "I gotta go or I'll hit traffic."

"Of course," his mom said, wiping at her own tears. Then she looked around her, specifically the carpeted staircase. "Where is your father?"

Steve toed at a seam in the hardwood floor. "I don't think he wants to see me."

"He's proud of you, honey. Just in his own way." His mother leaned forward and kissed his forehead. "He'll call you when you get there."

Steve nodded then took one last look around his house and walked out the door, happier than he should have been about leaving some of the memories of that house behind him.

He was just readjusting the boxes in his backseat, so he could see out the back window, when he heard the front door open again. "Ma, I have everything!" he called without looking up from his task.

"Son."

Steve straightened up so quickly he almost banged his head on the roof. "Yes sir?" he asked, spinning around to face his dad, who was

standing at attention—chest out, shoulders back—like he always did.

To his surprise, his dad held out his hand. "Be careful."

Steve didn't know what he expected, but it was definitely not that. Stunned, it took him a moment to return the gesture. "Always sir."

His dad nodded then turned on one heel and walked back into the house so quickly Steve half-wondered if he'd imagined the whole thing. While it wasn't exactly a hero's farewell, it was certainly better than the frosty silence of the past few weeks. Steve considered it for another moment then decided to tally it as a win.

An additional bounce in his step, he slid into the car, closed the door, then drove off into the sunrise, ready for whatever challenges the police academy could throw at him.

After all, there was no way it was more frightening than any of the shit he'd seen the last two years in Hawkins.

Thanks for reading! I'd love to know what you thought!